

Linguistic Society of America

Gender by Greville Corbett

Review by: Mark Aronoff

Language, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Sep., 1992), pp. 605-610

Published by: [Linguistic Society of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/415796>

Accessed: 10/05/2013 07:08

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Linguistic Society of America is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Language*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

syntactic theory. *OCMC* does not even attempt to do something that ought to be possible but that advocates of GB syntax seem never to do, namely, to justify their particular version of GB theory on the basis of data in the language under discussion (and to avoid reliance on assumptions for which that language does not provide any support) rather than simply taking GB's principles and taxonomic schemes as given and applying them to facts of that language with at most minor alterations. If GB syntactic theory has the universality that its advocates attribute to it, it should be possible to motivate its various principles with data from any language, and the attempt to so motivate them would be a worthwhile safeguard against spurious universals that sound more universal than they really are.

REFERENCES

- CHOMSKY, NOAM A. 1981. Lectures on government and binding. Dordrecht: Foris.
 HUANG, CHU-REN, and LOUIS MANGIONE. 1985. A reanalysis of *de*: adjuncts and subordinate clauses. West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics 4.80–91.
 HUANG, C. T. JAMES. 1982. Logical relations in Chinese and the theory of grammar. Cambridge, MA: MIT dissertation.
 ——. 1988. *Wǒ pǎo de kuài* and Chinese phrase structure. Lg. 64.274–311.
 JAWORSKA, EWA. 1986. Prepositional phrases as subjects and objects. Journal of Linguistics 22.355–74.
 JIANG ZIXIN. 1990. A constraint on topic in Chinese. Journal of Chinese Linguistics 18.231–60.
 ——. 1991. Some aspects of the syntax of topic and subject in Mandarin Chinese. Chicago: University of Chicago dissertation.
 KAYNE, RICHARD. 1984. Connectedness and binary branching. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Department of Linguistics
 The University of Chicago
 1010 East 59th Street
 Chicago, IL 60637

[Received 10 July 1991;
 revision received 2 January 1992.]

Gender. By GREVILLE CORBETT. (Cambridge textbooks in linguistics.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. xix, 363.

Reviewed by MARK ARONOFF, *SUNY at Stony Brook*

The superb Cambridge textbooks in linguistics series has featured a number of notable Q-ships, major works disguised as texts that have advanced our understanding of a particular area of linguistics in sometimes dramatic fashion. Those that stand out in my own mind are the first two volumes, Bernard Comrie's *Aspect* (1976) and Peter H. Matthews's *Morphology* (1974; recently issued in a second edition), along with D. A. Cruse's *Lexical semantics* (1986), but other readers will have other favorites. I would bet, though, that whatever your list of favorites is, Corbett's *Gender* will join it.

I have not learned so much from a book in many years. C covers a vast array of gender systems (over two hundred languages, according to his own count), some of them very exotic and some of them in great detail. But this is no collection of curiosities; rather, C's goal is to show the reader how gender systems work. The book is thus theoretical, and though C has presented certain

aspects of his theory of gender in various publications over the last dozen years, including a book on Slavic agreement, this is the first place where we can find the theory fully developed. In that sense it is, like the other books in this series, a new synthesis rather than a compendium of received knowledge. And just like the others, it is based on solid understanding: C has spent many years, probably more than anyone else, trying to make sense of gender in all its complex variety.

Two warnings are in order, though, before we proceed any further. First, C is almost entirely silent on that hottest of language-based topics, the social construction of gender roles as it relates to biological sex. Instead, he uses gender in the more purely linguistic sense of 'syntactic agreement class' and, although many such syntactic gender systems are rooted in the division of the sexes, at least as many others are not. So this book is really for the hardcore linguist. Second, neither C's theory of gender nor his discussion of syntax is formal in either sense of the term: it is not mathematically rigorous in the way that 'formal semantics' tend to be, and is it not rigorously deductive in the way that 'formal syntax' à la Chomsky tends to be. C's theory lies instead in that great tradition of science whose goal is not formal explanation but rather understanding. Such a science does not seek to seize generalizations and subdue them, but rather to make sense. It is, as a colleague has pointed out to me, the physics of Einstein rather than that of the quantum mechanicians. This is not to say that it should be of no interest to the formally minded. On the contrary, just as Einsteinian relativity is the explanandum of quantum mechanics, so too does formal linguistics need the sort of work that is represented here. For without it, the formalist runs the risk of explaining nothing or having nothing to explain.

After a brief introductory chapter, C moves quickly to the heart of the book, three chapters on gender assignments—the ways in which nouns are allocated to genders. The core notion here is that of the GENDER ASSIGNMENT RULE. Such rules assign the gender of a given noun as a function of either its meaning or its form (broadly construed). Gender assignment rules are implicational and of a sort that phonologists have come to call 'feature filling.'

C claims that 'all gender assignment systems are semantic in that there is always a semantic core to the assignment system' (8), and he devotes Ch. 2 to languages whose assignment rules are limited to or dominated by semantic factors. The next chapter treats what C calls 'formal systems', in which gender is determined by either morphology or phonology, that is to say the actual form of a noun. It is a little misleading to lump all these assignments together under the term 'formal'. Many morphological assignments depend on the declension class of a noun (C provides assignments of this type in his detailed analysis of Russian, for example). But declension class is a purely abstract notion and is therefore very different from 'formal' factors that are truly grounded in substance, such as the sound of a noun. In fact, phonologically determined gender is quite uncommon, though C reviews some startling work that shows that gender in French can be predicted 85 percent of the time from phonological shape alone. It also, incidentally, says something about the quality of C's schol-

arship that he has unearthed three different accounts of the phonological basis of French gender (Bidot 1925, Mel'čuk 1958, and Tucker et al. 1977); in each case, the authors of the subsequent studies were ignorant of their predecessor's very similar work. I too, though I have published work on phonologically determined gender and though I was once a student of the authors of the 1977 work, was ignorant of all of them, but not C, who reviews this last work in detail.

An important point that emerges from Ch. 3 is that most gender assignment 'systems' are mixed, dependent on a variety of semantic, phonological, and morphological factors, the last both concrete (specific morphs) and abstract. C points out that there are no syntactic gender assignment rules of this sort: nouns that take prepositional complements are neuter. He attributes this lack to the fact that lexically assigned syntactic properties of this type are rare. If this is indeed the reason, then one might conclude that gender may be assigned on the basis of any lexical property of a noun.

Ch. 4 contains arguments for the psychological reality of gender assignment. There has been very little experimental psycholinguistic work in this area, so the chapter is augmented by discussions of borrowing and change (in fact, these two topics together take up more than half of the chapter). Ch. 5 is an introduction to agreement, through which gender is actually realized. C reviews the kinds of elements that show agreement and the forms that agreement may take; he includes a detailed discussion of the particularly baroque form of verb agreement in Khinalug, a little-known member of the Lezgian subgroup of Northeast Caucasian.

In Ch. 6 C turns to the question of how the linguist establishes the exact number of genders in a given language. After providing a semiformal definition of gender in terms of the notion 'agreement class', he argues that a distinction must be made between the agreement class of a noun, which he calls *CONTROLLER GENDER*, and the class of the element that agrees with that noun, which he calls *TARGET GENDER*. It is easiest to understand this distinction within a mechanistic framework. On the basis of simple gender systems, we usually treat (controller) gender as a syntactic feature on nouns that moves or is copied up to the noun phrase and from there to agreeing elements. Controller gender and target gender are therefore the same thing, on this view. C argues that this view is incorrect—that there are languages in which the gender system of the noun and that of the agreeing element are distinct. Mechanistically, instead of a gender feature moving from the noun onto the agreeing elements, a given feature on the noun maps onto a corresponding but different feature on the agreeing element, and the mapping may simply be surjective (and thus weaker). C gives as an example the gender system of Rumanian, which has engendered a great deal of discussion over the years. In Rumanian there are clearly three agreement classes or controller genders, traditionally termed 'masculine', 'feminine', and 'neuter'. However, elements agreeing with neuter controllers show the same form as those agreeing with masculine controllers in the singular and the same form as those agreeing with feminines in the plural. In C's terms, while there are three controller genders, there are only two target genders:

neuter and masculine controller genders map onto the same target gender in the singular, while neuter and feminine controller genders map onto the same target gender in the plural.

C gives many other examples, but I must confess that I am not entirely convinced of the validity of his claim. First, all the examples involve actual morphological agreement markers. We may therefore not be dealing with gender but with morphological realization. In Rumanian, for example, we may say that the realization rules for masculine and neuter singular targets are identical, and so are the realization rules for feminine and neuter plural. Thus, the contextual syncretism of the neuter with the two other genders in targets may be purely morphological and have nothing to do with the syntax of gender. In order to truly prove that it is a matter of syntax and not morphological realization, C must first find an example where the genders and morphological classes of targets are distinct. Then he must show that these (target) genders are not the same as the genders of controllers. Since it is unusual for a language to have targets (and not just controllers) that fall into lexically distinct morphological classes—Latin is one such language; one must know for a given Latin adjective what declension it belongs to, and even what gender distinctions it is sensitive to—it may be very difficult to find a language of the proper sort. (Latin is not, since the subclasses of Latin adjectives can easily be, and traditionally are, described in terms of syncretism of morphological realization of the three genders.) But if anyone can find such a language, C is surely that person.

My second reservation is that there is an interaction between gender and number in all the cases that C discusses. C himself says that number enjoys a special relationship to gender; for that reason, I am wary of setting up an entirely new theoretical notion until we can untangle the interaction of gender and number and their joint realization a little better. Nonetheless, Ch. 6 clearly stands out as the heart of the book. The margins of my copy are almost entirely obliterated by comments.

Ch. 7 continues on the same theme, beginning with a discussion of syncretism. C then moves on to the problems engendered by 'nonstandard' controllers, e.g. controllers that have no gender, such as infinitives, nonlinguistic utterances, or words mentioned rather than used. The chapter closes with a discussion of reference problems: what if you are not sure or don't wish to specify the gender of the controller? It turns out that there are various solutions to this problem—pick one form by convention (as with the infamous 'Standard English' *he*); use an evasive form (like English *they*); use a special form reserved for just such occasions (C lists only one language, though English speakers have been trying for years to institutionalize such a form); and finally, have no consistent strategy (as most educated English speakers probably do).

In Ch. 8 C lays out what he calls the AGREEMENT HIERARCHY, which seems to be modelled after Keenan & Comrie's relativization hierarchy (1977). This hierarchy is designed to deal with the problem of agreement *ad formam* (syntactic agreement) vs. agreement *ad sensum* (semantic agreement): if there is a conflict between the actual lexical gender of a controller and the gender that

one would expect it to have on semantic grounds, which one of these two genders actually shows up on the target? The answer is that there is a hierarchy of target types and that one end of the hierarchy is more likely to show semantic agreement and the other end syntactic agreement. The hierarchy is attributive < predicate < relative pronoun < personal pronoun. Attributives are the most likely to agree syntactically and personal pronouns the most likely to agree semantically in cases where the two criteria conflict, with the other types falling in between in a monotonic progression from one end to the other. As usual, C provides a wealth of splendidly varied evidence from many languages for his claim, but there is a bit of an old-fashioned flavor to this chapter. Nowadays, there is more interest in what might motivate the existence of such a hierarchy, a question on which C is largely silent. (Let me confess, though, that I have no explanation for the hierarchy, though intuitively it makes perfect sense.)

Ch. 9 is devoted to the fascinating topic of gender resolution: when conjuncts conflict in gender, which one wins? C points out that gender is not alone; person and number also sometimes call for resolution. For these, though, the resolution seems to be largely governed by universal principles, which C somewhat misleadingly calls rules. It is important to realize that not all languages have gender resolution rules. Languages that avoid conjunction and languages in which all plurals show the same agreement (e.g. German) don't need them. It is also common for one—usually the nearest—conjunct to determine agreement, a way to avoid having to involve gender resolution rules (in C's narrow technical sense of the term) that is found even in languages that show gender resolution. C has discovered, though, that certain contexts favor resolution; most interesting among these is his observation that the farther along a target is on his agreement hierarchy, the more likely it is to show resolution. C shows that languages differ according to whether they follow syntactic or semantic principles of gender resolution. This difference seems to be independent of how well motivated the gender system is. For example, while Bantu genders are as arbitrary as those of Indo-European, languages of the former family seem to favor semantic principles, while Indo-European languages favor syntactic principles, though in some (e.g. Polish, whose resolution system is fabulously complex) there is a mixture of semantic and syntactic factors. The last chapter contains a short recapitulation of C's main points accompanied by suggestions for the future study of gender—which, if C is to have a role in it, will surely produce new and wonderful insights.

I will close with a few words on the form of the book. Overall it is excellent, with remarkably few typos for a book containing so much data. I do have two quibbles about transcription, though. C uses the transcription system of his sources, except in two cases. For the languages of the Caucasus, which he cites frequently, he has made some minor changes in an effort at standardization. The problem here is that the transcription he has adopted is somewhat unusual, and, though he gives a source for it, the source is not widely available; a short table might have been appropriate. For Algonquian languages he has standardized the length marker as a colon. My other quibble, then, is why has he not done something similar for other families that he cites frequently. In

particular, a standard transcription of Dravidian retroflex consonants would have been useful.

I have one additional remark to make on an editorial matter. C and (presumably) the Cambridge copy-editor make no effort to observe the infamous that/which distinction in restrictive relative clauses. For this relief, much thanks, and why can't American publishers give up on this device, whose sole virtue (speaking as the husband of a copy-editor) is that it gives copy-editors more billable hours?

REFERENCES

- BIDOT, E. 1925. *La clef du genre des substantifs français (Méthode dispensant d'avoir recours au dictionnaire)*. Poitiers: Imprimerie Nouvelle.
- KEENAN, EDWARD, and BERNARD COMRIE. 1977. Noun phrase accessibility and universal grammar. *Linguistic Inquiry* 8.63–99.
- MEL'ČUK, IGOR. 1958. Statistika i zavisimost' roda francuzskix suščestvitel'nyx iz okončanija. *Voprosy statistiki reči*, 112–30. Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta.
- TUCKER, G. R.; W. E. LAMBERT; and A. A. RIGAULT. 1977. The French speaker's skill with grammatical gender: An example of rule-governed behavior. The Hague: Mouton.

Department of Linguistics
SUNY at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794-4376

[Received 10 February 1992.]

A perceptual study of intonation. An experimental-phonetic approach to speech melody. By JOHAN 'T HART, RENÉ COLLIER, and ANTONIE COHEN. (Cambridge studies in speech science and communication.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. xv, 212. Cloth \$49.50.

Reviewed by CARLOS GUSSENHOVEN, *Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen*.

This book may be seen as a main report of the intonation research carried out since 1957 at the Institute for Perception Research (IPO) in Eindhoven. In eight chapters the authors (henceforth HCC) set out their research strategy and methodology, as well as the theoretical and practical results of their work. The 'Introduction' (Ch. 1, 1–9) explains how HCC set themselves the task of isolating the linguistically significant elements from the welter of large and small F₀ variations in the speech signal obtained from Dutch utterances. This sifting out of 'involuntary' and 'voluntary' pitch movements led on the one hand to an interest in perceptual thresholds (what cannot be heard cannot be significant) and on the other to the subjective evaluation of variously 'stylized' versions of original F₀ contours. Ch. 2 ('Phonetic aspects of intonation', 10–37) includes the results of their psycho-acoustic interest in the form of a very useful overview of pitch-perception studies. The chapter also contains a careful discussion of the physiology of phonation and pitch variation, including that of intrinsic pitch, perturbations, and a (necessarily eclectic) account of pitch measurement techniques.

Ch. 3 ('The IPO approach', 38–67) spells out the IPO research methodology. The first step in their analysis-resynthesis procedure concerns the elimination